

BRITAIN'S CASE AGAINST GERMANY

A Letter to a Neutral

BY

The Late Rev. H. M. GWATKIN

Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History
in the University of Cambridge

Reprinted from THE NATION, October 14th, 1916.

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1917.

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FOREWORD.

It was thought that the following letter by the late Professor Gwatkin should have a wider circulation than was possible from a Swedish vicarage, therefore it was printed in the "Nation" newspaper, and by its force and moderation attracted much favourable attention from readers in England and the United States.

Special interest attaches to it from the fact that the premonition expressed in the last sentence of his work being nearly ended was quickly realised, for the letter proved to be the last of Professor Gwatkin's published works; ere it was in the Printer's hands, he was seized with sudden illness, and passed to his rest on 14th November, 1916. Thus the Publishers had not the benefit of his personal revision of the proof sheets.

All who knew Professor Gwatkin not only admired him as an Historian and Scholar, but they loved him as a man, for his simple goodness and devotion to truth.

JOSEPH BLISS.

Professor Gwatkin's letter is a reply to one written to him by a Swedish clergyman. That had given reasons why, notwithstanding much kindly feeling for the English, the writer's sympathies in the present war were with Germany. His reasons, briefly stated, were the following. In Sweden they did not believe that England really went to war on account of Belgium, but merely used that as a pretext to excite public feeling at home. To them it was incredible that Germany should select the time for declaring war which was most unfavourable to itself, or that it had been for years preparing for war any more than England. They considered it absurd to accuse Germany of wanting to subdue Europe or the world, seeing that the population of the British Empire was between five and six times that of the German, and much the same proportion held between those of the Entente powers and the Central. They did not believe that England had any unselfish care for the small nations. Its action in Greece, its forcing Icelandic fishermen to sell fish at a nominal price, its obstruction of Swedish trade and investigation even of postal packets, showed its habitual treatment of those weaker than it. They objected to the way Germany used its Zeppelins, but was that worse than the attempt "to starve to death a whole nation?" They did not recognise any great moral difference between the cases of the "Lusitania" and the "King Stephen," or feel much indignation about the execution of Miss Cavell, seeing that, if a man had done the same, he would have been rightly put to death. As regards the horrors of war, they thought that many of those laid to the charge of Germany had been much exaggerated. Things unjustifiable had no doubt been done, but by both sides, and in his opinion the desire to "crush Germany" was unworthy of a Christian nation. Thus, notwithstanding his personal affection for many English, he could not think their country in the right.



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AN ENGLISH CLERGYMAN TO A SWEDISH CLERGYMAN.

“ REVEREND SIR,—I have to thank you for your account of opinion in Sweden, and most cordially for your exceedingly kind tone towards myself and other English friends. I only regret that you cannot think as well of our nation as you do of individuals.

“ I am an old student, and I wish to be just. I quite see that some German ‘ lies ’ are very natural mistakes, as when they thought that the ‘ Warspite ’ was sunk off Jutland, and it is clear that some things have been unduly pressed against them. I should agree with you, for instance, that the Cavell case is not so very bad. They were within their rights ; and all that can be said is that women are not executed for that offence in civilized countries.

“ I claim no special virtue for my own country. I say only that we never sought the war, that we could not honourably avoid it, and that, to the best of my judgment, we have little to be ashamed of in our conduct of it. When we assured Germany in 1912 that we were not, and never would be, parties

to any hostile design against her, we were officially told that this was not enough—that we must promise to be neutral ‘in any case,’ if war broke out. The only case our assurance did not cover was that of a wanton attack on France or Russia. As to our want of preparation, we simply refused to believe that a professedly civilized and friendly nation could be guilty of this infamy. At all events, the more severely you blame us for it, the more you are bound to grant that we had no aggressive designs.

“Now look at Germany. Take a few facts out of many :—

May, 1914.—Reservists called up from the Far East.

Early June.—Arms for cruisers sent out to Buenos Ayres.

June 15th.—Contracts in America for coaling cruisers *at sea* at specified places and dates in August and September.

June, Late.—Reservists called up from Natal. (On my personal knowledge.)

Last instalment due of the great War Loan.

July.—Bills on London far in excess of trade requirements drawn by Germans, such bills falling due after August 1st.

July 31st.—The ‘Kronprinzessin Cecilié’ in mid-Atlantic receives message in special cipher, ‘War has broken out with

England, France, and Russia. Return to New York.' [Now (a) the cipher was delivered sealed to the captain two years before ; (b) war had *not* broken out. The English ultimatum was not sent till August 4th. Germany was still 'negotiating.'].]

" Is all this innocent precaution ? Do not all the items *converge* on the certainty of war early in August ? A month earlier nothing would have been ready : a month later the reservists would have been idle, and the bills would have had to be paid. Now, how could they have known that date before May if they were not themselves planning the attack ?

" You are quite mistaken in saying that we allege no cause of war but Belgium. In the critical days of 1914 our intense reluctance to fight was nearly overcome by a clear conviction that we could not let France be crushed, and we should certainly have fought on that ground when the invasion of Belgium removed our last hesitation. Our resolution was instant and as nearly unanimous as any in all our history that if Germany dishonoured her solemn guarantee, we should have to enforce ours. We gave it for our interest if you please, but we kept it also for our honour. There was neither time nor need to 'organize public opinion,' and, indeed, it could not have been done in the face of such bitter

division, that the enemy had fair grounds for expecting us to be paralyzed by civil war.

“About the conduct of the war, I agree with you that many of the stories need more careful sifting ; for instance, your own story of the Iceland fishermen compelled to sell us their fish for a trifle. If that be true, it is the first time I ever heard of Englishmen seizing things for less than their full value—as a rule, they are badly cheated. But if some stories are doubtful, that is no excuse for indiscriminate scepticism. However, as I want to run no risk of overstating my case, I will make a great concession here. It is believed by the Allies, and indeed by most neutrals, that the Germans have committed barbarous enormities in the occupied territory. It seems as well established as facts can be, and that not simply by French or Belgian evidence or that of neutrals, but by the avowals or admissions of Germans, that they have plundered the country, burned towns, committed wanton massacres, dishonoured women, slaughtered ‘hostages,’ and reduced the population to practical slavery, enforced by deportations and barbarous punishments, and that these outrages are not due to the passions of undisciplined soldiers, or even to the connivance of brutal officers, but to the direct commands and systematic policy of the highest authorities. No doubt there has been some exaggeration, as there always is when devilish deeds are done ; but a very

large discount will still leave the Germans below the level of savages, for savages are not in the same way sinners against light. Now, let all this go for nothing. Let no more mention be made of outrages, from the deliberately repeated massacres of Louvain to the hellish jeering of the German crowd at the bodies of English officers done to death in their starvation camp at Wittenberg. Let silence cover abominations that cry to heaven like the cry of Sodom. Let the Kaiser's hands be pure as snow, his preachings of hate and frightfulness forgotten. Let his lying ministers pass for men of honour, his ferocious officers for refined and courteous gentlemen, his brutal soldiers for chivalrous enemies, his reptile press, his spies, his incendiaries, for generous and high-minded patriots. What then? Do not some broad facts come out above the chatter of lies that bewilder you in Sweden? It is not disputed that the Germans have systematically used floating mines, poisonous gases, aircraft on undefended towns, torpedoed even neutral merchant ships at sight, and forced Belgians to work for them in munition factories—all which things they promised by the Hague Convention not to do. Are these methods of civilized warfare?

“But, say you, there is nothing to choose between German and English methods. I am not so sure of that. I think you will find that most of our alleged offences which give so much annoyance

to neutrals are only natural and necessary adaptations of old laws to the days of great ships and parcel post. If a ship is too large to be searched at sea, our plan of bringing it to port is perhaps as humane as the German plan of sinking it at sight, and if they send rubber in parcels, there may well be some delay over your innocent Christmas presents from America. Vexatious as these things are, you cannot fairly compare them with what the Germans have done. Coming, however, to cases where we have had to follow the enemy's example, we never defended our towns by aircraft till they had been attacked while undefended, and our own raids have been aimed at military positions only. Gas we never used till the enemy had used it against us, and we have not maliciously chosen a gas which permanently ruins health. Nor can they decently complain of the starvation plan. They used it on Paris and tried to use it on us at the beginning of the war ; and we did not limit imports of food by neutrals till they had threatened again (February, 1915) to starve us out by submarines. But, after all, the blockade of a country differs only in scale from the blockade of a town, which is confessedly lawful.

“ More than once your letter makes me wonder what stories you have heard, as when you say that (but for scale) the refusal of the ‘ King Stephen ’ to rescue the crew of the wrecked Zeppelin is as bad as the destruction of the ‘ Lusitania.’ May not the

skipper have had reason for 'not trusting them'? Do you believe that twenty-seven armed Germans would have allowed nine unarmed fishermen to take them to England? I say unarmed, for the Germans at once declared that the trawler was armed. This was false; and wilfully false, for in any case they could not have known it to be true. However, if it were true, the right comparison would not be with the 'Lusitania,' but the deliberate refusal, not of a mere skipper, but of a German Admiral, to rescue a single English sailor at Coronel.

"I must confess to some surprise at your contention that Greece has been treated no better than Belgium. We did not go to Salonika in open defiance of our own solemn guarantee, but at the request of M. Venizelos, and (except in his time) we have had to deal with a 'neutrality' as hostile as pro-German governments dared make it. Were we to let the coasts of Greece remain depôts for submarines, with help from officials, and more than connivance from the Government? Could we tolerate a large Greek Army, officered by Germans and pro-Germans, which made no secret of its intention to attack us in the rear? As for our treatment of the population, there is a ready, and I think decisive, test. The refugees of Belgium count by hundreds of thousands, all full of stories of outrages and oppression. How many are the refugees of Greece?

“ The most horrible feature of this war is not the destruction of property, or even of life, but the utter impossibility of trusting a nation which will not be bound by treaties.

“ We have a high respect for honourable enemies, as the Boers will witness ; but we can have none for a nation which not only prepared for years an unprovoked attack on us, but has conducted it with every aggravation of malice, treachery, and ‘ frightfulness.’ This is no panic-stricken fancy, but a deliberate conviction slowly forced by facts on an unwilling people, and, I think, never finally clinched till the Fryatt murder showed that they would not allow even their own sea-law, signed by von Pohl himself, to hinder their revenge on a man who had been too good a sailor for them. Can we demand less than reparation for the past, security for the future, and justice on the chief murderers ? This is the ‘ crushing of Germany ’ we aim at. Nobody wants to touch her independence, to meddle with her internal affairs, or to take any territory that is German in population and sentiment. Least of all does anyone dream of fining them three times the entire cost of the war, as they fined France in 1871. Some there are who would like to stifle German commerce permanently ; but I am not one of them, and I do not think they will get what they want. England does not nurse enmities. But we must

have some such most-favoured-nation clause as they imposed on France to frustrate the hostile *Zollverein* they threaten.

“ By the way, do not imagine that I count them fools, because I fancy they might have succeeded better in 1909 or 1919. They chose their time astutely ; but brutal cunning forgets the moral forces. They counted on civil war in England—and we closed our ranks at once. They looked for revolts in the Colonies and Ireland—and they got only Maritz and Casement. They reckoned on help from Italy—and Italy turned against them. They thought to break our spirit with Zeppelins and submarines and liquid fire—and they have only ‘ staggered humanity.’ For all this they have been exceedingly clever with the wisdom that descendeth not from above. I spare them the rest of the quotation.

“ The future is very dark. These men hate us like hell, and will only despise us in addition if we fail to crush their power for evil, and they are teaching their children in all their schools to hate us, too. They will not easily forgive us the wrong they have done us, and the echoes of the ‘ Hymn of Hate ’ will not be soon forgotten. Yet we never hated them before the war, and even now there is far more among us of anger than of settled hatred.

A wild cheer burst out when the pirate ship was—

‘Hurled headlong flaming from th’ ethereal sky,
With hideous ruin and combustion, down
To . . .’

but there was no thought of bottomless perdition in our hearts. That cry meant the joy of deliverance, not the revenge of malice on fallen enemies. There was no jeering then, or three days later. The English crowd was hushed before the majesty of death, when these same enemies were laid to rest in English soil, with every solemn rite accorded to our own dear brethren.

“England makes no war upon the dead. There will be friendship as well as peace with Germany whenever Germany is dead to the crimes of the past—but not till then.

“Many times I have longed for the voice of a prophet, not to tell us what the end of pride shall be—for that was never doubtful—but to speak the ‘Thus saith the Lord’ of a man who sees the things of time in the light of eternity, and can show us the slow procession of the ages in their courses, gathering round the ever-living Person of the Lord who loves no less the sinners of Germany than the sinners of England. I dare not hope that He would fully acquit us; but sure I am, unless truth and mercy are a mockery, that He would not lay on us the heavy burden of the hugest crime in history.

“ ‘ His way is in the whirlwind and in the storm,
and the clouds are the dust of His feet.’

“ By the perplexity and distress of nations we know that some glorious mystery is now revealing. God keep you, sir, and guide us all and cleanse our hearts to see and to receive it. My own work must now be nearly done ; but I believe and verily trust that our children and our children’s children will see a better, a nobler, and a more Christian Europe rising from the ashes of the old.—Yours, &c.,

“ H. M. GWATKIN.

“ Cambridge. September, 1916.”



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